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One to watch

Lizz Wright, who performed before Ray Charles on the festival's eve, June 25, and at Club Soda Saturday night, inspired Gazette New Music Critic T'Cha Dunlevy (in critics' highlights at right), to proclaim: "Watch her; she'll be back."

Even the staff at the jazz fest are singled out for praise for revealing 'themselves as human beings and music fans'

Best | All levels excel

CONTINUED FROM D1

"The programming is almost too rich," Gilles Boudru, the Paris-based editor of Jazz Notes magazine agreed. "You're always trying to make impossible choices." Boudru, attending the festival for the first time, singled out shows by Wheeler, Gustavsen and the Avram Fefer Trio as picks that paid off. He also spoke enthusiastically of local musicians like pianist Jeff Johnston and drummer Greg Ritchie.

For Arnold J. Smith, jazz history lecturer at New Jersey City University and treasurer of the Jazz Journalists Association, the festival has no comparable counterpart in North America.

"It's the most expansive and experimental festival – and you can hear Cuban music and ethnic sounds directly from the source, instead of the more derivative copycat acts you find in other festivals," he said.

Smith, a 16-year veteran, gave his strongest endorsement to Konitz's four invitation series concerts. "It was like growing up with Lee all over again, yet he never repeated himself," he said.

Even genre-spanning expectations were met. Publicist Brian Coleman, who helps bring festival-bound journalists to Montreal for the Boston firm of Braithwaite & Katz, bestowed kudos on everything from David Murray's straight-ahead jazz to the Fefer Trio's mixmaster approach and Rubin Steiner's "Jazztronica."

And Brazilian songbird Bia? "Kicks Ceuaria Evora's ass," Coleman said.

And with the jazz fest music goes the peerless jazz-fest ambience.

"It's a gigantic festival, but also très intime – a big machine that has a family atmosphere," Boudru said. "People on the street stop you to talk about music – people you will probably never see again."

The festival's good vibrations act as a great equalizer, according to Anaïs Detolle, who welcomed the musicians as soon as they got off the airport bus at the Wyndham Hotel.

"There are a lot of big stars at our festival, but they don't act like it," she said. "Maybe it's the atmosphere."

Or people like Detolle. Jazz Times reporter Bill Milkowski, who wrote Swing It! An Annotated History of Jive, said he has a sentimental attachment to the festival because his first child was conceived here in 1994. For him, it comes down to support at all levels.

"Compared with the staff at other festivals, the people here really reveal themselves as human beings and music fans. You develop friendships here that you don't elsewhere. The kindnesses seem to seep down to the audiences, who really co-operate with the musicians in creating an atmosphere. I've seen some of these artists elsewhere, but somehow they play out of their minds here – maybe because of the vibe of the audience," Milkowski said.

"You don't see negative displays of rowdiness. Everybody's mellow here. Human kindness – hey, what a concept!"

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BEST MOMENTS FROM GAZETTE WRITERS

IRWIN BLOCK: Dave Holland Big Band: For the best all-round show, combining cohesive group sound, challenging harmonies, and compelling solos, nothing at this festival surpassed it. **Jack DeJohnette's Invitation Series:** For its exciting dynamics, with percussionists Luisito Quintero and Giovanni Hidalgo. It became a Latin sizzler as clarinettist Don Byron played above the movement with his exquisite modern improvising. **David Murray's Quartet:** For most engaging small group, driven by the title saxophonist, with Hariku Shahid (bass); Lafayette Gilchrist (piano) and Mark Johnson (drums). **Alto saxophonist Steve Coleman and the Five Elements:** The top spot has to go here for innovative music and arrangements, and dramatic and engaging improvising, as heard Saturday night in the first of two shows. The group's trumpet player, Jonathan Finlayson, displaying a brightly burnished tone, is heading for jazz stardom.

T'CHA DUNLEVY: Ramasutra: Pacing was everything as Montreal's DJ Ram and his players built from a hypnotic, ethno-down-tempo vibe to a raucous ending that included drum-and-bass beats, and covers of Black Sabbath and the Clash. **Wilco:** Songwriting came to the fore as the American alt-country act dispensed heart-tugging beauty to a capacity crowd. **Laurent De Wilde:** France wins again – a powerhouse mix of real, hot jazz playing (with live bass, drums, keys, horns, DJ) and bang-on beats. **Viktor Duplaix:** "Welcome to a Philly soul house party," proclaimed the Philadelphia DJ-singer-producer, as he seduced the late-night dance floor with an eclectic, unified array of very sexy grooves. **Ben Harper:** The man could run for office in Montreal. His campaign would be a month-long, sell-out stint at Metropolis. **Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings:** Doing the mashed potato, among other things, as she commanded the masses from the main outdoor stage. The former prison guard doesn't mess around – she brings the funk – except for that mashed potato business. **Lizz Wright:** Watch her; she'll be back. At a tender 23, this Georgian jazz lady showed the poise, cool charisma and vocal depth that stars are made of. Her encore performance of Amazing Grace said it all. **Cotan Project:** Capturing the magical, dreamy mystery (and history) of the tango, and updating it with DJ dynamics and stunning visuals.

Mr. Scruff: Standing apologetically before a euphoric, sweaty, still-hungry crowd, unable to deliver more as Club Soda management shut him down at the ungodly hour of 3 a.m. Where's the after-party? **André Ménard:** Jazz fest programmer and co-founder protecting his investment outside the sold-out Ben Harper show Wednesday, getting into a midnight scuffle with a bootleg T-shirt vendor. Ménard quickly ended the dispute by grabbing a pile of shirts and handing them out to passers-by as the culprit slunk into the night.

JOHN GRIFFIN: Ben Harper: He now owns this city with two sold-out shows at Metropolis that ended Thursday July 4th's messianic revival meeting at 1:30 a.m. with Zep's Whole Lotta Love. He then left his guitar registering stun, dove into the crowd and body surfed the length of the hall and back on a sea of upturned hands while bandmates looked on in astonishment at the exchange of pure devotion. **Sarah Jane Morris:** The British soul diva at Club Soda June 27, who bravely overcame extreme jet lag to put all her "money on a horse named Janis Joplin."

PETER HADEKEL: The Jack DeJonette Trio with Herbie Hancock and Dave Holland: A real demonstration of the art of the trio. **Kenny Wheeler with John Taylor:** Beautiful, lyrical playing from both, with added punch from guests Dave Holland and Chris Potter. **The Spanish Harlem Orchestra:** Anything that wasn't bolted down was moving at the Grand evenement. **The Kenny Werner Trio:** Subtle, nuanced improvisation featuring great taste from all the players. **Lee Konitz with the François Théberge Sextet:** Great arrangements of Konitz's music and plenty of exposure for his solo work.

BERNARD PERUSSE: Elvis Costello and the Imposters: For a beautifully-chosen and performed selection of songs, from one of rock music's richest catalogues. **Joe Zawinul Syndicate:** For exciting musical cross-breeding and virtuoso playing that was warm and listener-friendly.

Kobayashi: For the thrill of seeing a local group live up to their promise – confident, in fighting trim and poised for even bigger things. **Jimmie Vaughan:** For a tightly-paced, muscular set that proved the never-ending vitality and versatility of the blues. **The Blind Boys of Alabama:** For turning the Spectrum into the funkiest, most soulful church on the planet for a couple of hours.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ: Theo Jorgensmann Quartet: Euro musique-moderne from Germany that was as fascinating to watch as listen to. **Stefano Bollani:** Solo piano over-the-top fizz, art as supreme entertainment (and vice versa). **Gabriele Mirabassi & Luciano Biondini:** Italian folk roots, classical chamber rigor and jazzy flights of fancy; an intimate stunning tour de force by the renowned clarinetist and close accordionist friend. **Kenny Werner Trio:** The forward-looking pianist with a florid touch in dynamic communication with wild-eyed drummer Ari Hoenig and beatific bassist Johannes Weidenmuller. **Lee Konitz Invitation Series:** A once-in-a-lifetime career retrospective of the eternally cool (and warmly human) 75-year-old alto sax legend; the closing New Nonet featured intriguingly adventurous balancing-on-ice arrangements. **Steve Coleman and Five Elements:** Blistering sax-playing in marvelous harmonic tandem with a full-bodied confident band. **Sheila Jordan with Steve Kuhn Trio:** Bebop memories and beyond with the last great jazz singer. **David Murray Quartet:** The great saxophonist and bass clarinetist in a comfort zone.

NOTES

Montreal-born pianist Nancy Walker takes $5,000 Grand Prix de Jazz

Pianist Nancy Walker won the Montreal International Jazz Festival's Grand Prix de Jazz General Motors yesterday. Nine others were in the Canada-wide competition, but it was Montreal-born Walker who took the trophy and a $5,000 cheque. The prize also entitled her to perform on the General Motors stage last night, following her Club du Maurier appearance on June 28. An opening slot for Gino Vannelli's festival-closing show at Place des Arts was among the other perks, along with an invitation to play next year's festival, a booking for the 2004 Festi Jazz International de Rimouski, 30 hours of recording time and a possible album deal with Justin Time Records. Walker, who studied under Kenny Wheeler and Jim Hall, has released three albums: Invitation, Luminosity and Levitation. The $3,000 Prix Étoiles Galaxie for best composition went to Karine Chapdelaine of Without Words. She won the Radio-Canada prize for her song Prisoner of a Dream.

BERNARD PERUSSE

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While the Wyndham Hotel was headquarters for jazz fest musicians and media, it was also overflowing with some of the 10,000 participants at the International Barbershop Harmony Convention. On Friday night the reception area was studded with groups of clean-cut middle-Americans in informal vocal jams, psyched up for Saturday night's championship event at Bell Centre (with Texas group The Vocal Majority cinching its 10th gold, defeating Northern Lights from Canada). 'Round midnight, Cape Verdian superstar Cesaria Evora limped exhaustedly into the scene, after her sold-out Salle Wilfrid Pelletier gig. She instinctively raised her hands and started to warble, an incredulous expression on her face towards these close-knit Americans who, for all she knew, could've stepped off Mars. Then she thought the better of it, and staggered into an elevator.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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"I'm here for Otis," one excited woman shouted out to no one in particular as she walked into the Metropolis Friday night for the Otis Rush-Jimmie Vaughan double bill. Unfortunately for her and other fans of the influential Chicago blues legend, Rush, backed by a generic band of journeyman funksters, delivered a spectacularly boring and overlong set. Headliner Vaughan faced an uphill battle to get the momentum going again when he walked onstage at 11 p.m. Luckily, he effortlessly raised the energy level – and then some. Playing largely off the luscious organ washes of Bill Wilkis, Vaughan's guitar positively sizzled through a smorgasbord of blues styles, from the slow shuffle of brother Stevie Ray's Texas Flood to the graceful soul of Bobbin' Me Blind. Blues belter Lou Ann Barton joined the band in the second half and turned up the vocal heat by harmonizing with Vaughan on scorchers like In the Middle of the Night and Natural Born Lover. On set-closer Boom-Bop-A-Boom, the two sounded like the Everly Brothers with a Godzilla backbeat. After the encores, Vaughan mingled with fans, posed for photos and signed CD covers, ticket stubs, T-shirts – even a guitar. He packed it in only when every last well-wisher was gone. A class act all the way.

BERNARD PERUSSE

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Pianist Jason Moran came on stage at the Salles du Gesù Friday night Monk-like, wearing a white fedora, but proceeded to show that, while he has absorbed many influences, he is very much an individual player with a developing musical personality. In a trio featuring tight accompaniment from Tarus Mateen on acoustic bass guitar and drummer Nasheet Waits, Moran referenced the tradition – Johannes Brahms, Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson – with tunes from his excellent Modernistic CD (Blue Note), and one from his mentor, the late pianist, Jaki Byard. More significantly, he staked out a clear position as a forward-looking artist in his mix of the lyrical and angular. He even used recorded audio conversations, including one in Turkish, as a fourth instrument to position himself clearly in The Now. He played softly and lyrically, but also exploded into cluster chords, pouring out notes all over the keyboard in his forays. Highlights in this 75-minute session were the last two pieces, where the intensity and resulting lyricism of his keyboard excursions were a thrill to hear.

IRWIN BLOCK

✦✦✦

Elvis Costello sat entranced at 75-year-old alto sax legend Lee Konitz's show with the Spring String Quartet on Friday. The eclectic post-punker hired Konitz to guest on his forthcoming album ... Ray Lioth, in town shooting a film with LL Cool J, chatted with Costello backstage after Elvis's show. Turns out they're buddies, as they reminisced about their first meeting at a restaurant in Santa Monica. Among the assorted fans fawning over Elvis was Jack Kerouac's niece, Christine.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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